

The Sacred Cow in India : A Reappraisal

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Introduction

The doctrine of the sanctity of the cow is regarded as one of the dominant symbols representing the Hindu culture. The Hindus place the cows on a level higher than other animals and assign a glorified term *go-mata* (cow-mother). This prohibits the very acts of cow-slaughter and consequently beef eating too. The Indian sacred cow has become a highly debated and widely acclaimed topic that gets immense popularity among the scholars from a number of disciplines, namely, anthropology, sociology, economics, etc. The various discourses by scholars on the origin of this idea of "sacred cow" is debatable as it is still a controversial issue. This paper intends to record the ways in which the cow has been placed in the annals of Indian history. It discusses briefly the theoretical controversies about the origin of this cultural trait and seeks to identify their limitations. It concludes with an attempt to provide a possible solution of the sacred cow dilemma.

Historical background

The historical records reveal ample evidences of the cattle in Indian subcontinent. Around 3000 B.C. in the Indus valley, the bulls among all animals were used for sacred purposes (Basham, 1954). In the following Vedic age², cattle were of greater importance. The hymns of Rig Veda³ mention several specialized words to distinguish various types of cattle. Throughout the Vedic period, cattle were a source of food and a measure of wealth (Brown, 1964; Kosambi, 1970). In the later part of Vedic age, there was a popular custom of killing a big ox to feed a distinguished guest for his honour (Prakash, 1961). Even the sacrificial priest was rewarded with cattle for rendering his service

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(Basham, 1954). To the Vedic people the importance of cattle was not merely an economic one. It had a significant role in ritual performances. Sacrifice was the cornerstone of the Vedic rituals. Cattle were the chief sacrificial objects and their products like milk, ghee (butter oil), etc. were offered as oblation to the Vedic deities (Brown 1964; Lodrick 1981). On the whole, the doctrine of *ahimsa*⁴ or special sanctity on the cow was absent in the Vedic literature except at its very end when it appeared in only the barest manner (Brown 1964). The textual reference to the doctrine of *ahimsa* appeared first in the *Chandogya Upanishad*⁵. This period was marked by the disappearance of the old Vedic tradition. The centuries following the *Upanishadic* age favoured the doctrine mainly in Brahmanical circles. According to Sutras, the Brahmins were in charge of sacrificing animals. During the period preceding the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism, animal killings were restricted to the extent of honouring guests and for deity offerings (Prakash, 1961).

With the inception of Buddhism and Jainism in the seventh century B.C. came the doctrine of *ahimsa* in its fullest manner. Both the religious traditions posed a fundamental opposition against Brahmanical sacrifice. Lord Buddha, in particular, had antipathy to animal sacrifice whereas Jainism imposed further rigidity on it. During the Maurya period, emperor Asoka (304-232 B.C.) became adherent to the doctrine of *ahimsa* and made Buddhism an imperial religion. He set the example of vegetarianism in his own palace, curtailing the royal household's consumption of meat almost to a vanishing point (Kosambi 1970). A revival of Brahmanism followed with the rise of Sunga Dynasty in 185-72 B.C. From the third century B.C. to the fourth century A.D., the real position of the concept of *ahimsa* was not clear as the classical texts viz. the *Bhagavata Gita*⁶, *Manusmriti*⁷ and the *Arthashastra*⁸ remained equivocal and ambivalent on this issue (Brown, 1964). From the third century A.D., the consumption of beef was discouraged and finally it took the shape of a taboo by the Krishna cult of Vaishnavism⁹ which also started at the same time (Lal 1967). Vaishnavism or the Krishna cult remained dormant for some centuries. It was revived in the 15th century by the appearance of Vaishnav poets and saints, and also the translation of *Bhagwat Purana* into Hindi. As the Krishna legend appealed to the common man in India, Krishna's cow became the cow-mother of every Hindu (Lal 1967).

After the establishment of the Muslim regime in India, some Muslim rulers showed respect towards the cows as reconciliation with the Hindus (Parel 1969). They, as a matter of statesmanship, promulgated antisllaughter legislation. Babar (1483-1530) had issued a *farman* forbidding cow slaughter. Akbar (1542-1605) made injunctions against the slaughter of cow. During the 17th century, the great Maratha ruler Shivaji (1627-1680) used cow symbolically for political purpose. The protection of cow gave him the popular support for his opposition

to the Muslim rule. Cow was also used as the political symbol during the Indian nationalist movement. Dayananda Saraswati set up *Gorakhshini Sabha* (Cow Protection Society) in 1882 and made "cow protection" as an important component of his concept of Indian solidarity. Bal Gangadhar Tilak started the Shivaji festival and made the cow symbol an integral part of it. The political symbol of cow became a rallying point for Hindu resistance against both the Muslims and the British since they are beef eaters. Mahatma Gandhi also spoke many times in favour of cows as an inseparable item within Hinduism. But he never incited the Hindus against the beef eater Muslims. Gandhi most probably did not support Dayananda's *Gorakhshini Sabha*. For him, the term *Raksha* implies negative, anti-Muslim and aggressive connotation. Instead, he founded *Go Seva Sangh* (Cow Service Society) in 1924. In doing so, he tried to keep the Hindus away from the violently anti-Muslim *Gorakhshini Sabhas* (Parel, 1969). In the Constitution of India, Gandhi's vision came under the "Directive Principles of the State Policy" (Article 48). In 1952, the Central Council of *Gosamvardhana* (Central Council of Cattle Improvement) was set up to fasten traditional Hindu feelings for the cow with modern concept of cattle breeding and care. The holiness of cow and its importance in India's economy have led most of the states in India to enact legislation on the ban of cow slaughter.

Theoretical Controversy

A considerable amount of disagreement exists among the scholars over the origin of the sacred cow in India. A closer examination of all theories suggests that these mainly fall under two different lines of thought. One assumes a purely classical approach which sees the sanctity of cow as religiously determined while the other takes an opposite view by relating it with the techno-environmental factors. The proponents of classical approach are of opinion that the cattle population is surplus and it results from the act of *ahimsa*. According to techno-environmentalists, the present day cattle population is in harmony with nature; hence the population size, through large, is not surplus.

Classical Approach

After analyzing the classical texts, Brown (1964) refers the sacred cow concept as being primarily religious in origin. He identifies a constellation of at least five elements, mainly religious in nature, as contributing to the emergence of these concepts. These are — the role of cattle in Vedic ritual; the figurative use of words for the cow in the Vedic literature and their subsequent literal interpretation; prohibitions in the Vedas against violations of the Brahmin's cows; the association of the cow with the mother Goddess cult; and the *ahimsa* concept. Of these, *ahimsa* was of utmost importance and it gained ground from about the 5th century B.C. to 4th century A.D.

Dandekar (1964, 1969a) asserts that the bullocks are essential for ploughing in India and cows are kept chiefly for producing young bullocks in order to maintain bullock stock. Considering the prevailing technology and institutional arrangements in agriculture, he argues that the present bullock population is very much needed while the existence of large number of cows seems to be unjustified. In terms of bullock-replacement, he calculates that India had 43.50% surplus cows in 1961. This huge surplus results from the Hindu sentiment to the cow.

Heston (1971), applying the same principles of Dandekar, shows that in the state of Uttar Pradesh, present adult bovine male population of 72.5 millions would require for its maintenance only 24 millions breeding females as opposed to the actual 54 millions. Therefore, the surplus female is 30 millions. He finds higher proportion of cow in districts having predominantly Hindu population than districts dominated by Muslims. Similar results are obtained when he compares parts of East Pakistan with Assam and West Bengal, West Punjab and East Punjab, and Sind with Rajasthan and Gujarat. He remarks that the Hindu religion does lead to unusually large holdings of female cattle.

Misra (1973) observes that the surplus bovines in India dates back at least to the 19th century. According to him, bovines are indeed surplus at present as it was before. He works out the extent of surplus cow at 19.37% by taking a calving interval of 2.4 years. His conclusion is similar to that of Dandekar, Heston and others.

Lodrick (1979) explores the impact of religion on cattle population in urban situation, thus eliminating the agricultural variables. The two neighbouring districts (one is predominantly Hindu and other Muslim) were chosen for the purpose. His samples show that the Muslims keep only buffaloes, not cows at all, while the Hindus do favour cow over buffalo by a ratio of almost 4 to 1. He opines that the predominance of cow among the Hindus appears to reflect a religious preference for the cow, whereas the Muslim preference for the buffalo is based on economic consideration - the superiority of the buffalo as a milk animal under local conditions.

Freed and Freed (1972; 1981), in explaining the influence of religion on the demography of cattle, made a diachronic micro-level study at a village level. In the 1950s, the village agriculture was totally dependent on bullocks. In 1958-59, there were 95 bullocks and 47 cows in the village. Adopting the ratio of 1 cow to 3 bullocks from Heston (1971), they have found out that about 32 cows would have been sufficient to maintain the existing stock of bullocks, leaving a surplus of about 15 cows or 47% (Freed and Freed 1972). From 1958-59 to 1977-78, the major techno-environmental change was the introduction of tractor for agriculture operation. As a result, the number of bullocks has reduced. In 1977-78, there were only 12 bullocks and 47 cows. In terms of bullock-

replacement, only about 4 cows would have been required, leaving a surplus of 43 cows. Not only the cows appear to be surplus in both the periods, they are also uneconomic because the cattle census show that the buffalo, not the cow, is the animal of choice for the production of milk, ghee and dung. Thus the techno-environmental function for the presence of most of the cows has been eliminated and their existence is ascribed to the religious veneration of cows (Freed and Freed, 1981).

Techno-Environmental Approach

Harris (1966) explains the entire cattle complex of India in ecological terms. He addresses cattle management policies as positive functioned and probably adaptive process of the ecological system of which they are a part, rather than the influence of Hindu theology. The sanctity of cow, as he considers, appears to be an identity of the Hindus. It derives meaning from ecological regularities in India. It is a naive statement since India was never a single unified ecological entity, rather it is a cultural unity (Diener, Nonini and Robkin, 1978). According to Alland (1975), this is an ancient trait which developed under ecological and demographic conditions vastly different from those found in the present day.

Harris makes an association between cattle complex and agro-economic system in India. The cattle are chiefly used for traction, milk, dung and hide, etc. In addition, cows give birth to calves and thus play a crucial role in maintaining bovine stock (Harris, 1966). Indian agriculture is featured by private ownership, small holding size and seasonal rainfall. Ploughing is done within a very short period of time during which farmers take no risk of hiring draught animals from others. Therefore, there is no other way but to possess a number of cattle (Bhatia 1963; Harris, 1966). As the lands are facing fragmentation, it leads to the growth of cattle population. But this process operates upto a certain limit beyond which high maintenance cost of cattle compels farmers to give up the ownership of draught animals (Vaidyanathan, Nair and Harris, 1982). However, this theoretical formulation faces unrelenting pressures from others. According to Crotty (1982), the statistical correlation between cattle demography and agriculture does not speak of the possession of cows by a large number of landless people. Azzi (1974) remarks that cow may have some economic importance, but it does not suggest that the cattle are unaffected by *ahimsa*.

Harris further reasons out the adaptiveness of cattle complex and states, 'Men and bovine cattle do not compete for existence' (Harris, 1966). It is a falsified statement. Because crop residues and other crops used as fodder also have alternative uses for human consumption. If the cattle are less, the land put under fodder cultivation would be diverted for human uses. Therefore, men and cattle always do compete for existence (Dandekar, 1969b; Heston, 1971).

Harris opines that the Hindus never slaughter cows, because people get benefit from those till their (cattle) death. As the pasture and cattlefeed are limited, a large number of cattle undergoes starvation. He, in most of his writings (Harris, 1966; 1974; 1977), demonstrates that starvation or neglect of cattle by the Hindus is a state which arises out of unconsciousness or unknowingness. It is a fallacious statement. Empirical evidences prove that the mode of starvation is entirely deliberate and the Hindus consciously starve those cattle that are less productive or have lost usefulness (Sebring, 1987).

Raj (1969) establishes the age-sex composition of the required livestock population for given pattern of consumption demand of USA, a developed country and of India, an underdeveloped country. He then compares the required with the observed consumption pattern and points out that there is no marked differences between the two in both USA and India. Later, Raj (1971) also computes the ratio of cow to bullock is around 0.33 or even lower in several districts of Western Uttar Pradesh. Not all of these districts have large Muslim population and as a result, the cause lies elsewhere than in religion. Following Harris, he concludes that the cattle population of India have economic base and religious sentiment does not operate on its demography.

Rao (1969) advances his view which is based on 'Cobb-Douglas Production Function'. The actual number of milch animals, as he suggests, may not have exceeded the desired number. Dandekar (1970) opposes the use of 'Cobb-Douglas Function' and argues that correct formulation should be based on marginal productivity. Rao's estimation is not free from bias, because the samples are drawn not only from the least milk producing region but also from where buffaloes rather than cows predominate (Misra, 1978).

Limitations

The classical and techno-environmental theorists though have advanced their scholastic views on the basis of demographic analysis of cattle population, still the approaches have got certain limitations judging from the Hindu value system. The classical theorists see the cow cult as one of the ancient traits that came with the rise of Buddhism and Jainism in the 7th century B.C. and later popularised with the Vaishnavism in the 3rd century A.D. The authenticity of this statement is undoubtedly true, but it still casts doubt on other areas. The doctrines of Buddhism, Jainism and Vaishnavism preach *ahimsa* towards all animals not specially cows. How and why the cows, not any other animal, came to be a symbol in Hindu theology? Even today the people of these sects, though follow vegetarianism according to the dictum of their religions, worship only cows in almost all religious ceremonies and as such cow is accorded special sanctity among them. Do the cows have significance other than religious one? These are the questions which do not find adequate explanation in classical theoretical model.

The techno-environmental theorists, while establishing their stand in this popular debate, have also done some errors. According to them, the present day cattle population results from the adaptation to agro-ecological system and is never under the influence of religion. Nevertheless, the role of religion cannot be completely ignored. At the time of communal riots between Hindus and Muslims, indiscriminate killing of cows by the latter was an attempt to strike on Hindu sentiment. The Hindu fundamentalists occasionally raised slogans in which ban on cow-slaughter took a significant position. In order to emulate upper caste Hindus, a great number of tribal and lower caste people have given up beef-eating. Moreover, the concept of *ahimsa* imposes ban on beef-eating which prohibits Hindus to take a very cheap source of protein. It is not unusual to see in almost all cities that the Muslim proprietors of hotels and restaurants located in areas with mixed population hang a board with "No-Beef" written on it to attract Hindus there. All these phenomena do not rule out the effect of religion, atleast in part, on the management of cattle population.

The techno-environmentalists further comment that the Hindus are rational; they either sell the cattle to slaughter house or starve them to death only when they lose their economic potentialities. This, in turn, implies that the Hindus do not love and respect their cows, rather what they do is just-being opposed to *ahimsa*. This is indeed an ironical statement. In reality, majority of the Hindus do not sell their aged cows to the slaughter house. Only a section of them do it and neglect them to death due their poor economic conditions. Milkmen in the city of Calcutta and other suburban areas hold the same view. But their love towards cows is still reflected in a number of ways. In many occasions, they mourn for their cattle which are sold out to slaughter houses. The eldest members of such families sometimes become nostalgic while narrating past events associated with those cattle to other family members who listen to them with rapt attention. Even new born babies, specially in rural area, are given the names of their beloved cows whom they have lost. These instances show that the action of Hindus in this context is not always an expression of their belief. There seems to be a major theoretical limitation of transformative rule in empirical analysis. Epistemologically, the emic aspect can not be derived fully from the etic aspect of culture.

Conclusion

While reviewing the topic, it can be positively stated that the sanctity of cow in India is not a recent phenomenon. Its genesis dates back at least to the 7th century B.C. Earlier attempts explain the cattle complex from a religious point of view. It emanates from its religious ambit to get modern credentials in 1960s largely through the works of Marvin Harris who explains the problem in ecological perspective. Since then, the hiatus between the two increased and the entire discussion, as a matter of fact, is marked by two sharply divided polarised theories.

The polemics clustering around the sacred cow dilemma have already reached its pinnacle without having a single exposure to its solution. In theoretical parlance, both the analytical models, though have their own limitations, are equally important. They are, in fact, complementary to each other and constitute two sides of a coin. The analytical power of each one gets momentum if it recognizes the importance of the other one. Moreover, the limitations of one theory are the source of explanation for the other theory.

In India, the sacred cow encompasses an intricate relationship between economic-ecological and religious factors. It would be unrealistic to trace which one precedes the other. They must be viewed within the framework of feedback relationship. An ecologically adaptive socio-cultural phenomenon operates well if it is protected by religious prescription. On the other hand, the positively functioned religious phenomenon performs smoothly when it is economically viable and ecologically adaptive. In this context, the most important issue is whether the feedback mechanism is in balance or not. With regard to the Indian cattle complex, the feedback mechanism is not balanced as the overdue importance on the *ahimsa* results into a large number of emaciated cattle which are indeed uneconomic and less adaptive too.

Notes

1. This report is based on a paper submitted for "Research Training Programme in Social Anthropology (1988-89)" at Centre For Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.
2. The period extends from 3000 B.C. to 200 B.C. and is marked by four successive stages - Samhita, Brahmana - Aranyaka, Upanishadic and Sutra - Vedanga. In particular, four collections of text from the Samhita period are referred to as the four Vedas-Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Samaveda and Yajurveda.
3. The earliest Veda that contains a large number of hymns, most of which deal with mythology. A few of them also contain socio-historical and philosophical aspects.
4. The Indian doctrine of non-violence or non-injury to any form of life.
5. The earliest Upanishad which is attached to Samaveda and is aligned with the teaching of pantheism. Its text is highly allegorical and symbolic.
6. Concise form of Hindu philosophy containing the gospel of Krishnaism.
7. It depicts ancient Indian codified laws, social customs and practices upto the fourth century A.D.
8. It is written by Kautilya and gives an account of Indian society, customs and practices between 1000 B.C. to 400 B.C.
9. A monotheistic religious tradition that centres round the worship of the Visnu. Since the Vedic age, the cult of Visnu has undergone modifications by several incarnations such as Rama, Krishna etc. In its literatures, the most important ones are Mahabharata and Bhagavata Purana.

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